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TAGS: MARR PGOV PINR PREL VE  
SUBJECT: POLITICAL POLARIZATION: VENEZUELA'S DIVIDED  
FAMILIES

REF: A. 2006 CARACAS 01789  
1B. 2003 CARACAS 00682  
1C. 2005 CARACAS 00090

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Classified By: Political Counselor Robert Downes  
for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

11. (C) Summary. Venezuelan society has become increasingly politically polarized as a result of President Chavez' "with me or against me" tone of governance. Controversial constitutional reform proposals and his efforts to implement an increasingly radical "revolutionary" program in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (BRV) are exacerbating this polarization. Post offers the following anecdotes of high profile and politically divided Venezuelan families to illustrate the deep political cleavages among Venezuelans, as well as the bleak prospects for dialogue or reconciliation across political lines. End Summary.

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Political Gap Widens  
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12. (C) A Datanalysis poll taken in July and August highlights how politically polarized Venezuela is, with 39.4 percent of respondents believing the country is moving in the right direction and 41.5 percent saying the opposite. As Chavez presses for sweeping constitutional changes and radicalization of Venezuelan politics, economy, and society, the gulf between his followers and opponents is likely to grow. Controversial constitutional revisions, such as indefinite reelection and erosion of private property rights, will only harden these two camps. Indeed, some 39.8 percent of respondents to the same survey said that, if a referendum on the reforms were held "next Sunday," they would vote against it, while 30.2 percent said they would vote in favor.

The fencesitters who find political salvation in neither Chavez nor the opposition (the "ni-nis") may well choose to sit out a constitutional referendum--over 20 percent of the "ni-ni" respondents said they definitely or probably would abstain.

13. (C) President Chavez has been a polarizing figure from the beginning of his presidency. He uses strong, threatening language to divide Venezuelan social and political opinion to bolster his popular support and cow his opponents. He attempts to divide Venezuelan society into "haves" and "have nots," imperialists and Bolivarians, capitalists and socialists, and, perhaps most fundamentally, evil and good.

After more than eight years in power, Chavez' divisive messages have saturated domestic audiences and exacerbated political enmities (Ref A).

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A Bolivarian and Opposition Couple  
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¶4. (C) William and Andres Izarra are a formidable Chavista father-son team. William (the father) is well-known as an ideological author of the Bolivarian revolution and former Vice Foreign Minister for Asia, Oceania, and the Middle East. He is currently traveling throughout Venezuela to stand up "Ideological Formation Centers." His son, Andres, is a former Communications Minister and now heads Telesur, Chavez' international satellite television network. He also served as Press Counselor of the Venezuelan Embassy in Washington, and was news manager of the RCTV program, "El Observador," until he resigned in April 2002.

¶5. (C) In a James Carville and Mary Matlin union, Andres' wife, Isabel Adelaida Gonzalez Capriles, prior to her marriage in 2005, was a presenter on the pro-opposition Globovision talk show, "Alo, Ciudadano." She tendered her resignation after her relationship was made public and exposed her to harsh criticism from viewers and the Venezuelan public. To further complicate family relations, Gonzalez' stepfather is Antonio Ledezma, founder of opposition party Brave People's Alliance and member of the radical opposition movement National Resistance Command. Andres Izarra recently told Poloff and PD officers with a laugh that he and his wife can sometimes discuss, but always argue about and never will agree on, politics. He added that politics are not "central" to their relationship.

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Fratricidal Feuds...

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¶6. (C) Romance aside, a number of other high-profile Venezuelan families have similar internal political divides, oftentimes pitting brothers and sisters against each other. The Escarra family, for example, contains both the leading intellectual advocate and opponent of Chavez' proposed constitutional changes. Hermann, a constitutional lawyer, sat on the 1999 Constituent Assembly as one of the few non-Chavista representatives and is vocal in his opposition to Chavez's proposed changes. He calls the changes a "presidential coup d'etat against the Constitution and democracy." Hermann has been a frequent guest on political talk shows since Chavez announced his intention to change the 1999 document Hermann helped to draft.

¶7. (C) Meanwhile, his brother, Carlos, is also a constitutional lawyer as well as a National Assembly deputy and member of Chavez' constitutional reform council. A case of nurture over nature, opposition constitutional lawyer Tulio Alvarez told Poloffs August 28 that the brothers had been raised separately, one by their mother and one by their father, helping to explain the vast political gulf between them.

¶8. (C) The Toro Hardy brothers offer another microcosm of Venezuelan political life. Alfredo Toro Hardy is currently serving as the BRV's Ambassador to the United Kingdom. Alfredo has been a key proponent of the Bolivarian Revolution in the United Kingdom, and is a long-time leftist, intellectual, and diplomat. In a June interview to Venezuelan government television station VTV, Alfredo noted his deep and long-standing opposition to the neoliberal economic model and his belief that Chavez can "rectify the damage it has done" in Venezuela. His brother Jose Toro Hardy, on the other hand, is a former PDVSA director, columnist in pro-opposition daily, "El Universal," and

stauch critic of the Chavez government, particularly of its handling of the economy. He told Emboffs August 27 that he has already sent two of his children to live abroad in response to death threats he continues to receive for his outspoken opposition to the Venezuelan President. He explained that he and his brother are close and, since he believes in freedom of political opinion, he has to extend that same courtesy to his brother. Nevertheless, they do not discuss politics with each other, and, he chuckled, their wives prevent them from arguing over such issues.

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...Not an Uncommon Occurrence  
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¶9. (C) Another family mired in polarized Venezuelan politics are the Medinas. Originally hailing from the pro-Chavez party Patria Para Todos (PPT), the Medina siblings are now scattered across the political spectrum. Pablo Medina joined PPT and served as its Secretary General after splitting from the now-opposition party Radical Cause, which he helped found. In 2002, however, Medina tendered his resignation from PPT and set himself in radical opposition to Chavez, at times advocating violent uprisings (Ref B) and asserting himself as a potential opposition candidate prior to the December 2006 presidential election.

¶10. (C) Pablo Medina's sisters include Flor, an opposition affiliated-journalist who works with Pablo; Pastora, currently serving as a PPT deputy in the National Assembly; and Luisa, an assistant to PPT Secretary General and National Assembly deputy Jose Albornoz. A fourth sister is a pro-Chavez Ministry of Foreign Affairs diplomat posted in Italy. Flor Medina told Poloffs August 15 that the siblings amicably gather at family events but, like other politically divided families, cannot discuss Venezuelan politics. Flor did note that Pastora often seats herself next to Pablo and speculated that she may be seeking some sort of "reconciliation" with him.

¶11. (C) One of President Chavez' most vocal opponents is Monsignor Baltazar Porras, Archbishop of Merida and the former president of the Venezuelan Episcopal Conference. Bishop Porras has compared Chavez to Hitler and urged the USG to be more critical of the Venezuelan president (Ref C). Baltazar's brother, Teodoro Porras, has served as the ideological counselor for Chavez's Fifth Republic Movement (MVR) in eastern Venezuela and as campaign advisor for Governor of Anzoategui Tarek William Saab in the run-up to

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the 2004 gubernatorial and local elections.

¶12. (C) The Villegas brothers also make an unlikely political trio. Vladmir Villegas Poljak is the current Vice Minister for Asia, the Middle East, and Oceania and also served as Ambassador to Mexico, where he was infamous for his Bolivarian proselytizing. One of his brothers, Mario, is an opposition-affiliated journalist for "El Mundo," a pro-opposition daily, while the other, Ernesto, is a prominent Bolivarian newscaster on "En Confianza," a talk show broadcast over state-owned television station VTV weekday mornings.

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Comment  
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¶13. (C) Political polarization infects every aspect of Venezuelan society. The examples of prominent, politically divided families demonstrate that no sector, from the media to the clergy to the political and economic classes, is immune from this divide. Most telling, however, is the refrain Poloff heard repeatedly from members of these divided families--"we cannot discuss politics." There seems very little room for constructive political debate in Venezuela.

Members of the opposition and Chavistas alike seek data, opinions, and company that reinforce their own mindset rather than seeking new information or exchanges that challenge their beliefs. If even family members, who otherwise respect and love their siblings and spouses, cannot rationally communicate their political differences, there seems little hope in the near-term that broader Venezuelan society can find common ground, let alone reconciliation.

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